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ABSTRACT

Highlighting many of the author's own experiences as an artist and an art instructor, this paper laments the problem of visual ignorance among contemporary children and proposes a course in basic visual literacy. Such a course would teach form and content as interactive and synergistic concepts rather than as separate attributes. Students could learn to analyze visual statements at newsstands, at galleries, in the classroom, and at home. Visual literacy is as important as verbal literacy; it gives a person the power to overcome boredom by becoming interested in even the most trivial things, it nurtures the imagination, it enables critical viewing, and it makes one aware of the visual statement that one's own demeanor and appearance is making. (BEW)

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# THE REWARDS OF VISUAL LITERACY: AN ARTIST'S PERSPECTIVE

by
Deborah Curtiss

ED 393 412

## Introduction

In 1972 when I began teaching drawing and painting at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, I was startled by my students' inability to talk about visual experience or to understand me when I spoke about possibilities of visual expression. Word and image seemed more in conflict than as two cooperative realms of inquiry. Thus my research began into what I eventually learned to be a significant part of visual literacy. The courses I developed and taught, and the book I later wrote, were mutually reinforced by, and reinforcing of, my work at the easel. I found visual literacy and all its ramifications to empower all of my studio and classroom work. It awakened me to new ways to think about visual experience, for example, to recognize the gap between intent of the maker and the message received by the viewer. I became not only more accepting of differing interpretations, but encouraged them.

Thus, as an artist, I came to understand visual literacy by an indirect route. While I consider that my study of the topic has been life long, and I began formal art training at age 17, I did not learn the term, visual literacy, until 1977 when I discovered Donis Dondis's (1973) book, "A Primer of Visual Literacy". This was in conjunction with teaching a course of my own design, Visual Awareness, at Temple University in Philadelphia. It was another ten years, after publishing my own book, "Introduction to Visual Literacy" in 1987, that I learned of the I.V.L.A. As a result, I have a perspective that is somewhat different from many members of I.V.L.A., but no less encompassing. I shall therefore begin with a brief overview of my perspective in order to establish a shared concept of this complex and fascinating topic.

## What is Visual Literacy?

As with all things visual, visual literacy by nature defies exactitude, but in coming to terms with it, I and others borrow from the accepted definition of verbal literacy: the ability to speak, read, and write a language. If we accept the premise that visual statements--whether in the form of paintings, sculptures, buildings, park-spaces, ordinary objects, posters, films or videos--do communicate, the model serves us well. Let me explain.

Seeing objects, so to navigate ourselves in the world without bumping into them, entails a constant visuospatial dialogue between us and common reality. This process is as basic to us as is speaking--most of us walked before we talked. Navigating in the world, therefore, may be considered the visuospatial analog of speech. The ability to receive communication from visual statements, whether it is information, ideas, or esthetic fulfillment, so to understand and appreciate visual expression, can similarly be regarded as analogous to reading. The ability to create visual statements in at least one medium--whether as basic as sketching and taking a snapshot, or as complex as making a film or designing a building--can be considered analogous to writing.

Most of us here, however, will not claim that visual literacy is a literal or literary concept. Nor is it an attempt to make literature out of visual expression. Rather, by using the model of communication, and the notion of acquiring visual skills and acumen just as we acquire skills of reading and writing,

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we provide a way to think and talk about visual learning and experience. It becomes, moreover, a way to bring the verbal and visual together.

In summary, and I paraphrase I.V.L.A.'s founder and mentor, Jack Debes, a visually literate person is one who can identify, analyze, interpret, evaluate, and produce excellent visual messages.[1] These abilities are, I posit, basic and central to being an educated person at the end of the twentieth century, for at this time of proliferating visual communication, if we cannot see critically, can we really claim to be able to think critically? It is my thesis that visual literacy, at this juncture of technology and knowledge, must become an integral and active part of every person's communicative lexicon.

With a tremendous proliferation of visual communication, however, I find myself too frequently affronted with visual clutter, indifference, and ignorance. It is as if that which is essentially visual: The keen perception, the assessment, the endeavor to develop and express an *esthetic*, is ignored or overlooked. How, when this is perhaps the most joyful aspect of visual communication, can we continue to ignore it?

**Visual Ignorance**

Let us look to the roots of visual ignorance. When children are taught to read, write, and compute, their senses as significant learning tools are often suddenly ignored, neglected, and left to fend for themselves. When one considers that from birth a child learns almost entirely through instinctive sensory exploration--through touch, taste, smell, and sound as well as vision--this sudden neglect, virtual denial of the senses after age five or six, might be an act of violence, one that violates essential aspects of our beingness. One would hope that educators or psychologists would have recognized this oversight, yet, to my knowledge, little attention has been given to the possibility that learning disabilities may stem from this neglect of sensory development. Even in perception theory, sensory learning has been more interesting to study than to teach. (As far as I can tell, this neglect is worldwide. If anyone knows of a culture or place in which sensory education is actively nurtured, I would certainly like to know about it.) As *we* are educated, so we educate, and few are acknowledging or taking responsibility for nourishing the fundamental hunger that our young people have for sensory stimulation and integration.

Except, that is, for the enterprising media and entertainment moguls who exploit this voracious hunger by providing a barrage of sound and sight. From Saturday morning cartoons to boom boxes, video games, MTV and the RAVE rage, a majority of our young people are bombarded and desensitized more than they are educated. The result may be, rather than nourishment of the sensory craving they feel, anesthetization, or the establishment of addictions that may actually prevent growth of keen and sensitive perception.

**News Possibilities**

With the new technologies available for research and development as learning tools--such as interactive digital or computerized television, VCRs, teletexts and teleconferencing, and video discs--we have a daunting array of possibilities. The challenge to learn media languaging systems and educational potential is demanding, and those of us who are now devoting our careers to visual technology often find it difficult to make time to actually view the images. As we integrate visual media in education, let us keep at the forefront the fundamental importance of sensory learning and its centrality throughout education. Historically, the arts have served that purpose. More often than not today, however, the arts are considered by anyone other than art

[1]John L. Debes, Founder of the International Visual Literacy Association, 1968.

professionals and majors to be a fringe benefit, and educationally expendable.

Perhaps because there seem to be no rules, logical or otherwise, beyond the limitations inherent in materials and technology, many individuals, despite their high level education, find visual problem-solving and esthetic judgment easier to dismiss as unimportant than address as the basic forms of inquiry and expression that they are. The truths of quality and excellence have to be discovered, usually by devious and improbable routes, and such an uncertain process terrifies many of us. Visual thinking is sophisticated, challenging, and exciting, for visual problem-solving both incorporates and transcends the dialectic, utilizes, by necessity, the scientific method, and not only employs all models of artificial intelligence being explored today, but inspired many of them. Visual literacy educators therefore have a responsibility to be sure their students are grounded with the basics, the basic verbal and visual vocabularies that will provide a foundation for visual education and expression in all media and at all levels.

**Basic Visual Literacy**

As part of *Strategies and Infrastructures for the Future*, I propose a course of study in basic visual literacy. It would include a combination of readings, visuals, lectures, discussions, and experiential studio-type, hands-on, explorations. The teaching of history and perception, the *reception* of visual statements, is integrated with visual expression, the active making of visual statements.

In coming to understand visual statements, whether in a museum, at work or home, or on television, one knows that there is a difference between form and content. In most curricula today, learning about visual form takes place primarily in studio art courses, and content study takes place primarily in art history and communications courses. From the perspective of visual literacy, these two basic facets of visual messages are learned and experienced as interactive and synergistic, and as relevant to our being in the world.

While studying excellent and noteworthy works of art of the past, or contemporary expressions of the present--learning about the meaning, the context and significance of the work--the student may perform graphic analyses of magazine pictures in order to learn about and ascertain the use of the visual elements, the alphabet of visual expression.

How the elements are combined is the grammar, the compositional principles of visual communication. Students learn to analyze visual statements in the classroom, at galleries, and at home for their underlying designs: orientation, balance, focal points, rhythms, tension, conflict, and resolved unity. Learning to see beyond the surface of an image is one of the most important aspects of becoming visually literate, for it alerts us to hidden communications, and empowers us to evaluate more astutely a multitude of life and professional situations.

The characteristic ways an artist or visual communicator designs and shapes a visual statement, in which it becomes identifiable as the work of a particular individual, group, region, or period, determines the work's style. The style is also a significant part of its communicated content. As we recognize examples of representation, objective abstraction, and non-representation; or classicism, romanticism, and jazz to post-modernism; we can concurrently create simple visual statements that exemplify these qualities. By making examples in readily available media, such as drawing, photography, collage, or on computers, we gain experiential reinforcement of stylistic, formal, and communication concepts.

The interpretation of the meaning of visual statements is always relevant. How is the subject, information, story, social function, and intent to be interpreted, both within the historical context in which the

work was created, and from the viewpoints both individuals and scholars hold today? Historians, past and present, have interesting and diverse ways of looking at art and visual communication. Iconographic, connoisseurial, structuralist, social, semiotic, and deconstructionist approaches to experiencing visual statements, are all part of a visually literate person's lexicon for interpreting all visual experience. The recognition of hidden intent, persuasion, manipulation, and the ethics of any information embedded in visual expression, relies upon the visual literacy of the individual viewer to discern and evaluate.

We would not consider a person fully literate who could read but not write, so a person who only passively appreciates art and visual communications is not fully literate either. The ability to draw, to take a decent photograph, to arrange objects effectively in space, and increasingly, to use computers and video, are fundamental skills that every educated person should possess. The purpose is not to aspire to make great art or artists, any more than the purpose of teaching writing is to create poets. Through active creation of visual statements, one comes to perceive and know a wealth about the world in which we live, as well as appreciate the visual statements of others. In visual problem solving, forces, structures, relevancies, and implications are discovered, developing paths and methods of thinking that simply cannot be taught intellectually.

Today, when trendy popularity often reigns as a measure of merit and banality can pass for wisdom, all of us need to have the synthetical and interactive tools of visual literacy to evaluate and take responsibility for the visual statements we support and make. Only then can we rediscover the richness of the world with an educated and civilized vision, with sensitivity to the visual statements of others, and to the ecology of which we all are a part.

As one of my literature colleagues is fond of telling his students, "If you don't master the written word, you are destined to be manipulated and mastered by it." By the same token, if we continue to neglect visual literacy in education at all levels, we are at risk of being generously manipulated and mastered by the media of television and advertising. Some say we already are. Thus it is our task to support and nurture creativity through educational courses that are germane to the issues at this time.

Let us begin with ourselves. Each of us, as we got dressed as we are right now, engaged, to some degree of consciousness or lack thereof, in making a visual statement. Each of us individually and together as a group, are visual statements. What we wear, how we carry ourselves, how we look, says a lot about who we are, what we care about and value. What we don't. What we project into the world, what we wish to hide or wish to reveal. Whether we wish to attract one kind of person and not another. Visual literacy is based upon visual responsibility as well as visual response. It has a multitude of rewards which I shall now address.

### The Rewards of Visual Literacy for an Artist

My work in visual literacy would never have been possible without something I can only call my own personal and passionate love for the world of visible and visual experience. Early in my career I chose several challenges:

- To carry on the tradition of the nude in Western art.
- To do so with a uniquely personal response that is informed by both tradition and awareness of developing trends, but shackled by neither.
- To depict the essence of our humanness, of our consciousness.

- To keep drawing and painting, realism and abstraction, on equal levels of importance.

This combination of visual experience with verbal expression of that experience inspired me to launch DEEP SEE, a visual literacy consultancy under which auspices I give lectures, workshops, jury exhibits, etc.

Another reward has been participation in a demonstration affordable artist housing project. In addition to being an artist to qualify, however, I also had to finance a down payment and prove that I could garner a stable income to pay off a 30-year mortgage. Having just finished writing my second book, "Making Art Safely" (Spandorfer, Curtiss, & Snyder, 1993), I hung out my shingle as a wordsmith and am currently working at Philadelphia's largest architectural firm as a writer. (To my delight, there are a number of artists who also must earn their living other than through their personal work.) Thus qualifying financially, we artists purchased an abandoned factory building, gutted it and built 18 combined studio and living spaces. Visual literacy served me well as I designed my own space, hired workers to build a loft, install lighting, industrial carpeting, and to paint the ceiling and walls. Having moved into it in August 1992, I am proud to say that I have the home and studio of my dreams, one where I can paint all day by natural light.

In my painting now I am in a period of experimentation including a forthcoming exhibit in which I shall focus on the architecture of Prague; quite different from the elegant architecture of the human figure.

Whatever the subject, in my painting I move on several levels simultaneously. I celebrate the elements: line as melody, color as flavoring; shading and value for mystery and illumination. While I instinctively employ the Bauhaus design principles with which I was educated, due to my work in visual literacy I am more conscious, more verbally aware, of balance, figure/ground relationships, and dynamic forces as energy. Style options and painting techniques threaten to crowd my consciousness with possibilities for painting requires so many choices to be made continually while one works. Some of these choices I make consciously while others, due to the intrinsic spontaneous element of true creation, remain mysterious until after the work is completed. Later I may recognize choices, and question or justify them as an exercise of my ever growing visual literacy.

While developing my work in visual literacy, all these options initially crowded my mind, threatening that I become a calculated rather than spontaneous painter. Nevertheless, I accepted the challenge to extend my verbal vocabulary about visual experience, and I am not sorry. I think that my work is stronger for it, and the recognition I continue to receive may ratify it.

### The Rewards of Visual Literacy for All

Now for your Rewards: When you are visually literate, you will be aware and attuned to everything visible around you. This will be affected by the degree to which you choose to be visually aware, for we would be zombies if we proceeded in a constant state of keen visual receptivity.

By the same token, when boredom threatens while waiting for someone or thing, you have the power to become interested in the most trivial thing that lies within your field of vision. You can see it as the remarkable visual phenomenon that it is, watch it dance with all that surrounds it.

As you read a story, a passage of history or literature, you can envision yourself in that place and time, use your visual imagination to bring it alive, make it vivid and memorable instead of an abstract and distant place and time.

As you watch television, you will recognize hype and differentiate it from substance, separate sham from truth.

When you go home or to your work place, you will know how to assess your environment and whether it is designed well for its purposes; whether your room nurtures and relaxes you, or annoys with its discombobulation. You will have ideas about the poetics of space.

When you shop you will assess a product for its positive or negative visual presence. When you dress in the morning, you will see yourself objectively in the mirror, and have a sense of how and what you communicate.

Those who are visual literacy researchers and teachers will educate vision--encourage critical seeing and viewing--with every person and in every way possible.

And finally, you will spend the rest of your lives looking at everything you choose, with a keen and observant eye that is able to differentiate possibilities from actualities, and dare to make the possible actual; to contemplate the ideal and make it real. With visual literacy we are empowered to expedite thinking and critical assessment in all realms of experience.

**The Art of Visual Literacy**

As for me, all of those are part of my incredibly rich life, and I am dedicated to bringing visual literacy and all it implies to a broader audience. With my work, whatever the subject or medium, I hope to open doors of perception in ways that affirm life and its potential for excellence, integrity, beauty, and enrichment. At the same time, I am aware of realities and atrocities both in the world and within myself. But through all, I continue to explore a synthesis of drawing and painting, to seek a voice that is authentically my own, to paint what it is that I have to say that can be said no other way. As a creative artist, I have the power of creative transformation, and the art of visual literacy suffuses my life with, and in, all that I do; rewarding me in ways that are immeasurable. It is a pleasure to know that my fellow members of the I.V.L.A. are with me in this remarkable realm of inquiry.

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